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North Carolina congressional members under fire for remarks

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(02-06) 04:13 PST HIGH POINT, N.C. (AP) --

An advocacy group criticized two North Carolina congressional members for comments they made about Arab-Americans, saying the remarks are part of "a very disturbing trend."

Rep. Howard Coble, R-N.C., who heads the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, said on a radio call-in program Tuesday that he agreed with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Coble made his remark when a caller suggested Arabs in the United States should be confined.

And fellow Republican Rep. Sue Myrick, in talking last week about domestic security threats, referred to Arab-Americans by saying, "Look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country."

Both Coble and Myrick said their remarks were not intended to insult any ethnic or religious groups.

But Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations, called the remarks disturbing.

"Now we've got people saying everybody who works at the 7-Eleven who has a swarthy complexion is a potential threat," he said.

The congressman said he didn't agree with the caller about confining Arab-Americans, but did agree with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who established the internment camps.

"We were at war. They (Japanese-Americans) were an endangered species," Coble said. "For many of these Japanese-Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street."

Like most Arab-Americans today, Coble said, most Japanese-Americans during World War II were not America's enemies. Still, Coble said, Roosevelt had to consider the nation's security.

"Some probably were intent on doing harm to us," he said, "just as some of these Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us."

Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., a Japanese-American who spent his early childhood with his family in an internment camp during World War II, said he spoke with Coble on Wednesday to learn more about his views.

"I'm disappointed that he really doesn't understand the impact of what he said," Honda said. "With his leadership position in Congress, that kind of lack of understanding can lead people down the wrong path."

The Japanese American Citizens League asked Coble to apologize and said he should be removed from his committee chairmanship.

"We are flabbergasted that a man who supports racial profiling and ethnic scapegoating" chairs the subcommittee, the group's national executive director, John Tateishi, said in a statement Wednesday.

Myrick's comments came during a speech to the conservative Heritage Foundation last week about what she called Americans' lack of readiness to deal with future terrorist attacks. During a question-and-answer session, she spoke about danger within the country.

"You know, and this can be misconstrued, but honest to goodness (husband) Ed and I for years, for 20 years, have been saying, 'You know, look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country.' Every little town you go into, you know?"

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